

A great songwriter - and storyteller

REVIEW: At the Dakota, Jimmy Webb confirmed his reputation as a tunesmith and a singer of limited voice.

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Some announcers have a face for radio, some baseball players have a glove for designated hitter and some hotties have a voice for lip-syncing or Auto-Tune (or both).

It's been said that Jimmy Webb has a voice for songwriting. But his vocals are not why the Dakota Jazz Club was sold out on Sunday night. Like Burt Bacharach, Webb is the rare songwriter who became famous in the 1960s. He penned "Up Up and Away" for the Fifth Dimension, "MacArthur Park" for Richard Harris and "Wichita Lineman" and other hits for Glen Campbell. Webb came to sing those classics and tell stories about the singers who made them famous.

A master storyteller and big-time name-dropper, Webb, 64, talked as much as he performed during his 110-minute set. The intro to every number was at least as long as the song itself. He told show-bizzy tales about Frank Sinatra, Waylon Jennings, Linda Ronstadt, Billy Joel and Harris. He also talked about his father, a World War II Marine who became a baptist preacher in Oklahoma, and his late mother, who whacked him if he didn't practice piano. He talked about his wife, who leads PBS pledge drives in New York City, and about himself -- from his drinking (he's been sober for nine years) to his winning a bunch of Grammys in 1967 when everyone was talking about Bob Dylan and the Doors.

What Webb didn't talk about was his songwriting or what inspired some of his famous lyrics. In "MacArthur Park," what the heck was the cake that someone left out in the rain all about? Instead, he told a story

about Harris taking him to Ireland to sleep in the bed in which Richard was conceived. And then there was the tale about a wacky guy with a slide ruler in his pocket who came to Webb's dressing room one night and tried to explain to him that one couldn't possibly drive to Phoenix in such a short period of time, as the Webb song Glen Campbell sang suggests. "It's poetic license," the songwriter explained.

Making what was probably his first Twin Cities solo appearance (in 2003 he played with Michael Feinstein at the Pantages), Webb proved to be an emotive but colorless singer (he has made a series of solo albums) and a fluid pianist of his richly melodic songs with their ornate endings. He certainly confirmed his reputation as a songwriting legend and also made an unexpected case for being an entertaining raconteur.